

STATEMENT OF
SUSAN McDERMOTT
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR AVIATION AND
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Before the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION

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Chairman Hutchison, Senator Rockefeller and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Susan McDermott, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs at the Department of Transportation (DOT). The Department appreciates the opportunity to appear today to discuss ways to better manage congestion and delays at our nation's largest airports.

Senator Hutchison, Secretary Mineta asked that I convey his personal thanks to you and to the Subcommittee for your strong commitment to looking at steps that might be taken to reduce aviation congestion. Although the Administration has not yet taken a formal position on the specific legislation that is the subject of today's hearing, we look forward to working with the Subcommittee and others on these vital issues.

The congestion problem is really not a single problem, but is the result of multiple factors that have placed significant stress on our aviation system. Finding the solution will not, therefore, come all at once or from a single measure. We need to build more aviation capacity -- and that will not happen overnight. At the same time, fixing our capacity problem is not the work of the government alone. The airline industry must step up to the plate, and we must similarly work closely with airports, who are responsible for many elements of the capacity equation.

Congestion and delays have a very real and significant impact upon the traveling public. And the public is rightfully impatient for improvements. There are many conditions that can cause delays: bad weather, inoperable runways, airport capacity limitations, aircraft equipment problems, airline maintenance and flight crew problems, and air traffic equipment outages. Because of the multiple and varied causes for delays, we know they can never be entirely eliminated. Nevertheless, the level of delays that was experienced last summer is unacceptable. It is the job of the Department of Transportation, airlines and airports to work together to reduce delays to the greatest extent possible, without compromising safety.

In the year 2000, some 600 million passengers flew on U.S. airlines, a 50 percent increase in just nine years. And, as announced at the FAA's recent aviation forecast conference, the number of passengers on U.S. airlines is expected to hit one billion by the year 2010. Now we face the stiff challenge of providing the necessary capacity to match that demand. And do it safely.

The Administration has made clear in its Budget Request for 2002 that action is needed now. Our Budget will fully fund the FAA's air navigation needs, personnel costs, and increased funds available for airport grants. Congress set in place the funding mechanisms for this initiative in the Wendell H. Ford Aviation Investment Reform Act for the 21st Century.

In light of the flight delays our nation experienced in 1999, the FAA recognized that it needed to establish a collaborative planning process between the agency and the users of the nation's airspace system. Consequently, the Spring/Summer 2000 plan was established for severe weather operations.

The heart of this plan is a process called "collaborative decision making." It represents a fundamental change in the way the FAA has been doing business --centralizing much of their air traffic management planning, their coordination and their decision-making at the FAA system command center in Herndon, Virginia.

The key to the whole process is the real-time collaboration with the airlines to manage their operations in severe weather conditions. Last year was difficult, to be sure, but the Secretary believes it would have been twice as bad without this collaborative process in place.

Last fall, the FAA and the airlines reviewed their performance of the previous spring and summer -- what worked and what didn't -- and they have made a number of changes in terms of procedures and increased training that should substantially improve the performance of the system. To date, more than 3,000 people -- FAA controllers, FAA supervisors, airline dispatchers and operations personnel, as well as pilots, have completed training on the Spring/Summer 2001 plan.

Still, more needs to be done. As the Administration is developing a detailed position on the best approach to relieving congestion, we are looking at a range of approaches.

For example, a market-based approach, such as congestion pricing, represents one way to encourage air carriers to use limited capacity more efficiently. At the same time, however, it raises equity issues for passengers and communities that are served on less traveled routes. For this reason, the feasibility and effectiveness of using any market-based approach must be studied carefully with full public participation.

As Secretary Mineta recently stated, the Department is looking into options for expediting the environmental review process, without compromising environmental protection and concern for public sensitivity about noise, air and water quality, and other natural resources. The Department is completing an environmental streamlining report to Congress requested in AIR-21, and Secretary Mineta will use this as a basis for discussions about how to streamline the process.

One key to navigating the environmental review process is to get the appropriate federal and state environmental safeguards identified early and built in as the project progresses. Slow decision-making does not translate into better environmental results. However, local

cooperation is a key component of speeding the environmental process and local officials must be our active partners in this effort if we are to make significant progress. That means, for example, that we have to continue to reduce the problem of aircraft noise and deal with local problems of surface traffic congestion and air pollution near airports.

In closing, I want to thank you for your initiative in acting quickly to address these problems and to assure you that the Department of Transportation places a high priority on presenting its proposals for action.

This completes my prepared statement, Madam Chairman. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from you and members of the Subcommittee.